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AUTHOR Brown, William R.
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ABSTRACT

Students readily pick up occupational jargon from their special interests and studies. Nevertheless, the education and culture of teachers of communication typically have stressed the outright rejection of jargon of all kinds in the interests of honesty, directness, clarity, and economy of statement. Supporting the teachers ideologically are the critics of language. For them, jargon is almost always cast in the role of either buffoon or villain. Perhaps predictably, the attitudes of the authors of business and technical communication textbooks are similar to those of the teachers. However, jargon is (and always has been) indispensible to communication within a group of specialists. Therefore, the issues involving jargon should be faced by teachers of communication at every level. They should inform themselves about these issues and bring them before their students. Teachers should take a curious and realistic look at various kinds of jargon, try to distinguish the characteristics of each, the motiviations of their users, and their effects on audiences. Teachers should be aware of the background of jargon and how deeply woven it is in the fabric of American life and values. All of the resultant understandings should be placed before students and reinforced with exercises. Good jargon accomplishes the writer's purpose; bad jargon does not. Students should be given the kind of instruction that will help them to make informed judgments about using jargon in their communication. (HOD)

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JARGON AND THE TEACHING OF ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

William R. Brown

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Paper presented at the American Business Communication Association Eastern Regional Meeting, Philadelphia, PA, April 22, 1983, by William R. Brown, Philadelphia College of Textiles and Science:

JARGON AND THE TEACHING OF ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

This morning I would like to advance some questions related to how we should approach jargon as we teach organizational communication. I do not have complete and confident answers to all of these questions, but I hope that a look at the issues will be helpful. My central question is how can we place jargon in the kind of frame that will serve the needs of our students. In attempting to respond to this, we must also examine the question of what prevents us from approaching jargon effectively in our teaching, and whether we can arrive at a defensible distinction between acceptable and unacceptable jargon--good jargon and bad.

To begin with, a word about the background of jargon in American English. As immigrants, pioneers, farmers, and mechanics in a democratic nation, Americans developed their own language. According to Albert H. Marckwardt's American English, we have long been fond of word compounding of all sorts, forming verbs by adding "ize," coining verbal nouns, inventing overblown titles for occupations, and developing euphemisms.[1] Moreover, as a people much given to specialization, technological and otherwise, we have always used the language of specialization eagerly. Walt Whitman, who reflects so well much of the spirit of nineteenth-century America in his poetry, uses the language special to many occupations without explanation or apology. We see work specialization as the way to advance ourselves in life (just look at the number of university curricula), and we see the languages of the various work specialties as enhancing of the people who use them, as reinforcing of their value in their occupations, and as emblematic of their special knowledge and intelligence. The attractiveness of jargon in a nation that values specialization so much is very powerful. A telling illustration of this is the jargon-laden language of James Thurber's Walter Mitty as he speaks through the heroic identities of his daydreams, the naval aviator, the surgeon, and the soldier, all of whom are consummate specialists.

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[1]Oxford University Press, 1958.

It would be a mistake, however, to define jargon as only the language that is special to a particular line of work. More pervasive than this is popular jargon (variously called the "nominal" or "official" style), which is a mongrelized style that has come into general use as a result of the wide influence of technology, government bureaucracy, and the business and academic establishments upon everyday life. Students readily pick up occupational jargon from their special interests and studies. They absorb popular jargon from the air they breathe. They tend to use both liberally and uncritically in their writing and speech for a variety of reasons which we as teachers should be sensitive to, but often, unfortunately, are not.

Let us examine the attitudes of three influential groups toward jargon that interfere with a realistic classroom treatment of this aspect of style. First, let us look at the attitudes of communication teachers themselves, most of whom have cut their teeth on Strunk and White's Elements of Style in which jargon is anathema. The education and culture of teachers of communication typically have stressed the outright rejection of jargon of all kinds in the interests of honesty, directness, clarity, and economy of statement. Typically, however, while teachers will take pot shots at jargon where it appears in student work, they will hardly mount a campaign against it. As we shall see, many in fact approve it in practice while attacking it in theory. Supporting the teachers ideologically are the critics of language. For them, jargon makes good copy: it is always good for a laugh or a disapproving frown. Such writers as William Safire, Edwin Newman, Hugh Rawson, and John Simon tend to ridicule jargon as the language of bureaucracy, technocracy, bowdlerism, and the new Babbittry. For them, jargon is almost always cast in the role of either buffoon or villain. Perhaps predictably, the attitudes of the authors of business and technical communication textbooks are similar to those of the teachers. They typically devote a short section to jargon, telling you what it is and (without much conviction) to avoid it. Almost no one among these groups suggests anything near the full complexity of jargon and how varied are the occasions for its use in our communication.

People use jargon for many reasons. It is (and always has been) indispensible to communication within a group of specialists. But people use jargon also to display their knowledge of a particular field to members

of that field or to outsiders. This is jargon as credential. People use jargon also to show that what they are talking about is within a known (and perhaps controlled) pattern. This is the jargon of control. Examples of this type of jargon are the airline pilot who speaks on the intercom of "turbulence activity," and the traffic broadcaster who refers to "delay factors" on the expressway. A variation of the jargon of control is the jargon of reduction; this attempts to reduce the emotional impact of a situation. Press conferences during the Watergate and Three Mile Island crises give monumentally unsuccessful examples of this.

The kinds of jargon and why people use them are considerations that seldom reach the classroom. Little is said about the effects of jargon on audience, or, heaven forbid, how jargon might be used effectively to communicate precisely what (and how) the writer wants to communicate. Let me suggest that these considerations should be part of our writing instruction. That we tend to avoid them suggests to me that we sense our uncertainty and perhaps our unconscious hypocrisy about jargon. The full dimensions of this hypocrisy are revealed in a major article by Rosemary L. Hake and Joseph M. Williams, entitled "Style and Its Consequences: Do as I Do, Not as I Say."[2] Here the authors reveal through convincing research that teachers of composition at the high school and two- and four-year college levels tended to give consistently higher grades to student essays written in what the authors call a "nominal" style than to paired essays of similar content written in a "verbal" style. Nominal style refers to the wordy, inflated, complex, indirect language that I am calling here popular jargon. Verbal style is the concise, simple, direct language that teachers say they value. What they really seem to value, however, is the apparent sophistication that jargon lends to a statement.

An earlier study by J. Scott Armstrong of the Wharton School[3] reveals that composition teachers are not the only academics who are impressed by the nominal style. He asked twenty management professors to rank the academic prestige of ten management journals. In general, the rated prestige of these journals was in a negative relationship to their ease of reading as indicated by the Flesch Reading Ease Test. Further, he asked a

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[2]College English, 43 (September 1982), pp. 433-451.

[3]"Unintelligible Management Research and Academic Prestige," Interfaces 10 (April 1980), pp. 80-86.

group of 32 management professors to select the better of each of four paired passages of similar content but widely different levels of intelligibility. They tended strongly to choose the passages of greater complexity as the products of more competent writers.

My own experiences confirm that the preferences for jargon of these composition teachers and management professors are shared by many others. An exercise in the organizational communication course that I teach calls for students to write a personal resume. Students often take these resumes subsequently to the college placement office for editing if they intend to use them in their job searches. A student who writes a statement of objective like this: "My objective is a position in retailing with potential for advancement," will be advised to change it to something like this: "Objective: Association with a firm in the field of retailing which offers incentives to employees achieving at a high level of competence in the form of promotion to higher positions of management responsibility." The placement people would say that their version would be perceived by prospective employers as more sophisticated and intelligent, and they may well be right.

This brings us back to the question of how we should approach jargon to serve our students' needs. Should we stress the use of the plainest appropriate language in strict subject-verb-object sentences when we have reason to believe that this will get them low marks with many academic and professional audiences? As Ian Pringle has pointed out in a recent review of a book on style by the Joseph M. Williams who has been referred to above,[4] the question is ideological. The plain style is held to be good ultimately "because it is judged to be good by those whose education, taste, and sensibility make them the best judges."[5] The question of what we should teach about style in our communications classes is further complicated by how much time we feel we can devote to the philosophical, specifically the ethical, which is the level at which many questions of style involving jargon must be debated. Question: when in our professional lives we are called upon to make a statement on an issue about which

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[4]Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace (Scott Foresman and Company, 1981).

[5]"Why Teach Style? A Review Essay," College Composition and Communication, 34 (February 1983), p. 95.

we know little or do not wish to take a position, should we decline to comment and face what negative consequences there may be for this, or should we respond in the kind of jargon that is meant to conceal the absence of ideas? This kind of question may cause us to squirm, but we know that many communication situations call for politeness, indirection, and diplomacy. In their book on Japanese management, a subject in which there is much interest these days, Richard T. Pascale and Anthony G. Althos assert:

> Indirection has several important applications for management. First, it may be useful in communicating--both orally and in writing. Vagueness in communication can cause problems, to be sure, but it can also serve to hold strained relations together and reduce unnecessary conflict. There is too much American trust in increasing the clarity in communication between people, especially when their disagreements are substantive. Getting a currently hopeless impasse clear is often unwise and likely to make things worse.[6]

Although this undoubtedly is an accurate overview of the uses of indirection in Japanese communication, it suggests that American organizational communication is more uniformly direct and clear than we know it to be.

Now to my suggestions: the issues involving jargon should be faced by teachers of communication at every level. They should inform themselves about these issues and bring them before their students <u>as issues</u>. Teachers should try to go beyond the knee-jerk reaction to jargon which has kept many of them from treating it effectively in their classes. (This may be hard: my fingers did not want to type some of the statements that I am making this morning.) Teachers should take a curious and realistic look at various kinds of jargon, try to distinguish the characteristics of each, the motivations of their users, and their effects on audience. Teachers should be aware of the background of jargon and how deeply woven it is in the fabric of American life and values. All of these understandings should be placed before students and reinforced with exercises that I leave to your creativity, with the goal of making students aware of how jargon relates to such rhetorical concerns as communication purpose and the intended audience. Should the teacher be prescriptive about jargon? Is there good jargon and bad? I believe the answers to both questions are yes, although the standard of judgment is far more relativistic than many will

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[6]<u>The Art of Japanese Management</u> (Simon and Shuster, 1981), p. 146.

approve. Good jargon accomplishes the writer's purpose; bad jargon does not. All in all, we should give students the kind of instruction that will help them to make informed judgments about using jargon in their communication. In so doing we may make students more aware of the complexity of language in its more subtle aspects, and how it reflects the ambiguities of life.

William R. Brown
Philadelphia College of
Textiles and Science
Philadelphia, PA 19144